

## MARY SEACOLE: A Longing for Travel & A Desire to Serve

Born in Jamaica in 1805 to a free Creole woman and a Scottish officer in the British Army, Mary Seacole traveled thousands of miles alone during a time when women, much less a biracial woman, traveled at all. She was lionized during her lifetime along with Florence Nightingale and became close to members of the British Royal family but then was forgotten for almost 100 years.

Jamaica, along with the rest of the British West Indies, was a lucrative outpost for the British Empire during the early 19th century and was protected with a large military presence. Mary's mother ran Blundell Hall which amounted to, at the time, one of the best hotels in Kingston. Many of the guests were invalid soldiers and sailors often suffering from yellow fever caught soon after their arrival in the tropics. Mary's mother was a "doctress", a healer who used traditional Caribbean and African remedies to treat her guests. As a child, Mary began acquiring nursing skills helping her mother. Mary also spend part of her childhood in the household of an elderly woman who helped her obtain some education.

At about age 16, Mary made her first ocean crossing to England and then stayed in London with relatives for almost a year. She returned to England three years later with a small cargo of spices and exotic preserves to sell in London. Mary had a large appetite for discovery but didn't have a steady income and so became an enthusiastic merchant and trader to finance her travels—a pattern she would follow the rest of her life.

After returning from her second London trip, Mary spent the next five years traveling and trading around the Caribbean visiting the Bahamas, Bermuda, Cuba and Haiti. In 1836, Mary married Edwin Horatio Hamilton Seacole. Unusual in a time when mixed-race relationships were common but mixed-race marriages were rare, he was a white man. The newly married couple moved to Black River, Jamaica and opened a provisions store, which failed to prosper. They returned to Blundell Hall in the early 1840s.

During 1843-1844, Mary suffered series of personal disasters. Much of her property was lost when Blundell Hall burned to the ground in 1843. Blundell Hall was rebuilt quickly but then her husband died in October 1844, followed shortly thereafter by her mother. After a period of deep depression, Mary assumed the management of her mother's hotel. She threw herself into work, declining offers of marriage and became widely known and respected in Kingston. She nursed patients in the cholera epidemic of 1850, which killed some 32,000 Jamaicans. Mary attributed the outbreak to infection brought on a boat from New Orleans, demonstrating a common-sense knowledge of contagion theory.

Mary's natural restlessness overcame her and in 1851, she travelled to Panama to visit her half-brother Edward who had established a hotel in the small settlement of Cruces, catering to travelers of the 1849 California Gold Rush. Shortly after Mary's arrival, a cholera epidemic broke out. Mary was on hand to treat the first victim, who survived, which then brought her a succession of patients as the infec-

*continued*



As I grew into  
womanhood, I began  
to indulge in that longing  
to travel which will never  
leave me while I have  
health and vigor.  
I... never followed with  
my gaze the stately ships  
bound [for Europe] without  
longing to be in them and to  
see the blue hills of Jamaica  
fade into the distance.

- Mary Seacole  
*The Wonderful Adventures of Mary  
Seacole in Many Lands, 1857*

## MARY SEACOLE, CONT'D.

tion spread. While the rich paid, she treated the poor for free. Rich or poor, however, may die. Mary used mustard rubs and poultices, laxative calomel and rehydration with water boiled with cinnamon.

The next three years Mary spent in Panama and Granada, trading and nursing. During this time, she read newspaper reports of the escalating Crimean War. Florence Nightingale, with a group of nurses, had been dispatched by the British military to the area of fighting to bolster the unsanitary and overcrowded hospital. Mary decided to volunteer as a nurse.

Traveling to England, Mary brought letters of recommendation from doctors in Jamaica and Panama. On arrival she approached the War Office, asking to be sent to Crimea as an army nurse but because of her skin color was rebuffed at every turn for months. Finally, Mary decided as with her earlier travels, to fund her operations by trading. She assembled a stock of supplies and boarded a screw-steamer to Constantinople. On arriving, Mary met with Florence Nightingale but once again her offer of help was refused.

Mary collected her supplies and moved within a mile of British headquarters, close to the fighting. Hiring local labor, Mary's "hotel" was built from salvaged driftwood, packing cases, and iron sheets. The building was stocked with provisions shipped from London and Constantinople. Seacole sold anything "from a needle to an anchor" to army officers and journalists. Open six days a week and closed Sundays, Mary settled into a routine of opening early, serving morning coffee to passing travelers, and then dealing with callers' medical complaints, before traveling out herself to visit casualties.

Unlike Florence Nightingale who worked in a hospital miles from the fighting, Mary frequently put her own life at risk ministering to the wounded under fire. William Howard Russell, special correspondent of *The Times* wrote that Mary was "a warm and successful physician, who doctors and cures all manner of men with extraordinary success. She is always in attendance near the battlefield to aid the wounded and has earned many a poor fellow's blessing."

Peace talks began in Paris in early 1856 and allied soldiers began leaving the Crimea. Mary attempted to sell as much as possible before they left, but she was forced to auction expensive goods for knockdown prices. In poor health upon her return to London and followed by creditors from Crimea, Mary declared bankruptcy.

Mary's contributions were talked about by British military officers and her plight was highlighted in the British press. A fund was set up and Mary's bankruptcy discharged. Mary was also awarded Britain's Crimean Medal and France's Legion d'Honneur.

In 1857, an autobiographical account of her travels was published: *The Wonderful Adventures of Mrs. Seacole in Many Lands*, the first autobiography written by a black woman in Britain which further spread her fame. Mary joined the periphery of the royal circle. Prince Victor of Hohenlohe-Langenburg, (a nephew of Queen Victoria, had been one of her customers as a young Lieutenant in Crimea) carved a marble bust of her which was exhibited at the Royal Academy. Mary also became personal masseuse to the Princess of Wales. Her traveling days over, Mary died in 1881 at her home in Paddington, London.

While well-known at the end of her life, Mary rapidly faded from public memory. Her work in Crimea was overshadowed by Florence Nightingale's for almost a 100 years. Then in the late 20th century, Mary was rediscovered and has become a symbol of racial attitudes and social injustices in Britain. Today Mary is a figure appearing in Great Britain's National Curriculum, with her life story taught at primary schools alongside Florence Nightingale. ❖



Mary later in life living in England.